

Castlemaine Naturalist

December 2002

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*Wishing you all a Very Happy Christmas,
a Wonderful New Year,
and lots of rain in 2003!*

Scarlet Honeyeater at Vaughan Springs

Three years ago, on Nov. 14, a Scarlet Honeyeater was reported, but not confirmed, in Bowden Street. As far as the club is aware they had not been reported from this area before, though there are some reports from the eastern part of the state (and van Smeerdijks now have one at their place near Lancefield).

On 22/11 Margaret Badminton and her Queensland friend had decided to have a picnic lunch at Vaughan Springs and went for a walk along the track towards the old camping area about 3 o'clock. A flash of red was seen, and Gwen was convinced that what she saw was a bird familiar to her in Brisbane, and Margaret confirmed, after watching it with her binoculars, that it was an immature male Scarlet Honeyeater.

So it seems that the earlier report was right - and they have even bred in the district?

The Bird Challenge Count 2002

The CFNC again entered teams in the Bird Observers Club of Australia bird challenge. The aim is for the teams to record all bird species, and the number of each species, found on the day, within a 40 km radius. The count for the teams were pooled, to give the total for the Club. In some twitchathons, hundreds of kilometres are travelled with the aim of maximising the bird count. The BOCA count is more leisurely, with the aim of covering an area more thoroughly. For a bird to be counted, it must be seen and identified by at least two members of the team, or heard and identified from the call, by at least three.

I was in a team of three, with Lesley and Nigel Harland, and we were assigned the southern part of the Castlemaine district. We started at 9.15, and finished at 5.30. Our route was to the Chewton Cemetery and Rod Shop, the ponds near

Wattle Gully, the Fryerstown cricket ground and cemetery, and down to the Malmsbury reservoir for lunch. We then returned via the Loddon near Doxa, Glenluce Springs and Vaughan Springs. Last year we had time to stop at Warburton Bridge and Vaughan Cemetery.

Highlights were the six Black Honeyeaters near Fryerstown Cemetery and the female (or juvenile) Scarlet Honeyeater at Vaughan Springs. Another feature was the large numbers of Wood Swallows. They were so numerous that counting was difficult. An Eastern Rosella and Mistletoe Bird were seen by only one of the group, and so could not be counted. As was the case last year, Wood Duck was the most numerous species. Some of the notable omissions from our list were cuckoo-shrikes, egrets, hawks (except a single Brown Goshawk), robins (except for Yellow Robins), White-plumed Honeyeaters and Little Ravens. When we left Vaughan, Black Duck had not been seen, but we were able to find one swimming on Campbells Creek near Yapeen.

At the Rod Shop dam we saw a spoonbill with its head hidden. Very frustrating. We drove the car around to the highway, and a slammed door caused the yellow bill to appear. At the cricket ground we looked for the Owlet Nightjar seen last year, without success. We did however see a Large Black Cormorant circling above us, almost invisible without the use of binoculars. Vaughan was also a productive area. The birds did not appear to be concerned by the swimmers and picnickers.

The Bird Challenge Count is very enjoyable. I look forward to next year's count. Thanks to Maureen and Ken for once again organising the day.

Ern Perkins

The Big Dry

The last good winter rains were in 1996, and the bushland is showing the effects of the long dry period, and the very dry year to date.

Late flowering of eucalypts. Many of the Yellow Gums are in flower. They usually flower in winter. Other eucalypts are in flower, including Red Gum, Yellow Box and Peppermints. The larger trees appear to be coping with the dry conditions. Some of the smaller trees have died.

Leaf loss. Many of the bushland eucalypts have shed most of their leaves. The trees give very little shade. Golden Wattles have also shed leaves. In a few cases, eucalypt branches with mistletoe have died off.

Weeds. Many weed species have shown little growth, and the annual weed species appear to have died off early.

Hyacinth Orchids appear to be growing earlier than usual.

We are seeing some **unusual birds**, including Scarlet Honeyeaters and Black Honeyeaters. Over the past few weeks wood swallows have been particularly numerous.

Red Anther Wallaby-grass flowered profusely in the summer of 1999-2000 and many still have the remnants of the flower stalks from then. Last year there were very few flowers produced, and this year appears to be also flowerless, although a few show signs of producing flower stalks after last week's rain.

It will be interesting to see how the plants recover when wet conditions return.

Ern Perkins

61 Hunter Street, Spring 2002

The signs this year indicate earlier breeding than usual, and that food is scarce. As a result, there is more aggression, and in early September I was surprised to see a male Mistletoebird in hot pursuit of a sparrow, which finally cowered in the branch of a deciduous tree as the Mistletoebird hovered over him in a menacing fashion - hummingbird style! A week or two later a young Mistletoebird appeared at the bath.

Striated Pardalotes nested in both nest boxes, but sadly I have never glimpsed the young this year. Hopefully some have survived, but the presence of hungry ravens (and Wattlebirds) would make it difficult.

New Holland, Yellow-faced, and occasionally White-naped Honeyeaters have all been around, and Little Lorikeets were feeding in September on an Ironbark blossoming nearby. Goldfinches, Silvereyes and Yellow-rumped Thornbills all visit the baths as well as a pair of Grey Shrike-thrushes and the Blackbird pair - and the objectionable Ravens as well. (Unfortunately they have produced two young this season, as have the Red Wattlebirds, making life very difficult for the smaller birds).

Eastern Rosellas visit occasionally, but Crimsones are around continually, and even nipped all the scarlet flowers from a Correa in their search for food. The parrot nest box is unoccupied this year. Three Indian Mynahs turned up once or twice but were soon dismissed by the Wattlebirds. On one memorable occasion I saw a single Mynah being pursued across the road to Buda by a flock of Yellow-rumped Thornbills!

Shirley Parnaby

Cooroy Wetlands

(sounds better than Cooroy Sewerage Works!)

Stan Bruton sent a note and a copy of the Suncoast Bird Observers Group Newsletter back in September, but it got lost in the to-ing and fro-ing, but his note and the bird list referred to couldn't go ignored.

Stan had been staying on the Sunshine Coast and had "greatly enjoyed a visit to the environmentally friendly Cooroy Sewerage Works on July 6, just before heading for home. The Works ponds are much smaller than Castlemaine's, very shallow and all planted with Australian native water plants and carefully monitored by a Brisbane University group.

"I did not see or identify half of the total species counted, but had a memorable morning."

The list which was recorded in the newsletter totalled 75 birds, including 7 heard. Some of the species were such treasures as Nankeen Night Heron, Royal and Yellow-billed Spoonbills, Grey Goshawk, White-headed Pigeon, Rose-crowned Fruit Dove, Topknot Pigeon, Variegated and Red-backed Fairy Wrens, Pale-headed Rosella, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin and Golden-headed Cisticola.

It sounds like a wonderful place to visit.

Christmas Plants

I was looking through some of my plant books to find what plants are flowering in the bush at Christmas, and was intrigued by the number of "Christmas" plants, especially in NSW. For instance, the Blandfordias, or Christmas Bells, *B. cunninghamii*, *B. grandiflora* and *B. nobilis* and Tasmania's *B. punicea*. NSW also has the Christmas Tree, or Bush, *Ceratopetalum gummiferum*, and there is the widespread Christmas Bush, *Prostranthera lasianthos*, one of which used to grow on the Cat Dam track in the Moonlight Flat Pine Plantation, but it was bulldozed out when the road was widened. It probably grows a bit further south around Macedon and possibly Daylesford, as it prefers a damper climate than Castlemaine's. Another very showy Christmas Bush is the Western Australian *Nuytsia florabunda*. A trip to the Fitzgerald River NP in summer would be wonderful, just to see the stands of this root parasite, which my sister and I saw in October, in full flower.

I wonder what would be an appropriate "Christmas plant" for this area. There is the Magenta Storksbill *Pelagonium rodneyanum* which is a bright splash of colour in the drab summer bush, or Blue Pincushions *Brunonia australis*, Golden Everlastings (well, that's what I've always called them!) *Bracteantha viscosa*, or perhaps even the Box Mistletoe, *Amyema miquelii*? Christmas Mistletoe has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Much better than Box Mistletoe

Rita Mills

Observations

- Margaret Badminton has White-browed Woodswallows nesting in the fork of a Red Gum on her property at Erin Court. She also came across a

Tree Dragon, or Jacky Lizard at her place. (These attractive little dragons have tails which are longer than their body. When disturbed in the open they will rise up on their hind legs and run like a Frilled-neck Lizard, and at a distance can be mistaken for a leaf blowing across the road. They will climb the nearest tree to safety, hence their name. Ed.)

- Robyn and Bill van Smeerdijks' son watched an owl for some 15 minutes in the Cobaw forest. He looked carefully through the bird book when he got back to the house and identified it as a Sooty Owl. He is wanting to know if anyone has heard of, or seen, Sooty Owls in the Cobaw/Lancefield area previously.

- Margaret Dunne reported hearing the screaming call of the Barking Owl and sighting a Scarlet Robin on her property at Muckleford.

- Margaret Willis's report was in the form of a question. Why do Magpies, on a hot sunny day, lie stretched out or appear to play on her mulch heap?

No one came up with a definite answer, but others have seen them playing - pulling each other's toes and feathers, and teasing generally - on mulch and compost heaps.

- Geraldine Harris was also curious about what was taking patches of bark off her trees. The answer to this one is probably "Galahs" which strip patches off the trees, seemingly in their search for a suitable spot to start a hollow.

- On Nov. 9 Shirley Parnaby spotted a Rufous Night Heron, complete with white breeding plumage, perched on a low branch at the edge of the water at the northern end of the island in Lake Johanna. As she watched through the binoculars he gradually made his way up the branch to a higher level and into the denser vegetation.

- On the same day she saw a pair of Red-rumped Parrots grazing peacefully, close to the lake at the southern end, and further around on the foundry side a Dusky Moorhen feeding two tiny chicks among the fringe of overhanging roots at the edge of the island.

- Debbie Worland has found Black Honeyeaters, normally a dry country bird, on the Castlemaine Golf Course. Other people have seen them since and confirmed her sighting. Two of the birds seem to be juvenile males.

- Geraldine Harris has seen, and heard, Clamorous Reed Warblers along the creek on their Barkers Creek property.

- Athol and Carol Dorman had a 4 foot Brown Snake shoot across the path in front of them when they were on the Diggings trail near Chewton.

- Richard Piesse has seen a flock of about 30 Straw-necked Ibis only about 1 ½ km from his home south of Vaaughan. He has never known them to be in this area before. He noted that there have been 1000s of Corellas, Galahs and Ravens on cropland which has recently been harvested.

- The Buff-banded Rails at Peggy Munroe's place appeared, towards the end of November, with 4 chicks. They crossed the path "like a family of Roadrunners" in front of Peg as she sat outside one evening.

Sept/Oct at the Castlemaine Golf Course.

Debbie Worland has again been walking and birding on the Golf Course and has come up with another interesting list of birds, a number of which are breeding:

Red-browed Finches (50+)
Restless Flycatchers (nesting)
Australasian Grebes (nesting)
Grey Teal
Hardheads
Musk and Little Lorikeets
White-browed Babblers and young
(6 adults, 3 young)
Black-chinned,
New Holland ,
Fuscous and
White-naped Honeyeaters
Crested Shrike-tits
Grey Shrike-thrush and young
White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes
White-browed Scrub-wrens
Grey Fantail
Little Eagle

Brown Goshawk
Black-shouldered Kite
Brown Falcon
Dusky,
Masked and
White-browed Woodswallows
(nesting) 50+
Yellow Robin and young
Olive-backed Oriole
Rufous Songlark
Rufous Whistler
Horsfields Bronze Cuckoo
European Goldfinch
Thornbill sp.
Long-billed Corellas
Striated Pardalote
Crested Pigeons (nesting)
Pacific Black Duck and 11 young
White-faced Heron
Little Pied Cormorant

No sign of Lathams Snipe yet and the dams are nearly empty.

Debbie Worland

From the President

Two important publishing events will have taken place by the end of the week. On Friday we have the launching of the CD of plants and vertebrates of the Box Ironbark region of Central Victoria. The CD production has been organised by the Bendigo, Castlemaine and Maryborough Field Naturalists Clubs, and with the support of numerous sponsors. The CD is published by Viridans. The other event was the launching of the new edition of Malcolm and Jane Calder's book. The first edition was called *The Forgotten Forests*, but this name is no longer appropriate, now that we have the Box Ironbark National Parks and the National Heritage Park.

With this newsletter you should receive nomination forms for next year's committee. If you are not on the committee, please consider nominating. The Club does not have separate Committee meetings, but instead holds business meetings, usually on the fourth Thursday. Any member is able to attend and participate.

The weed identification CD should be available soon after Christmas. It is expected that over 300 weeds will be illustrated and described. It will be in Adobe Acrobat, and so will be able to be used on Mac computers as well as Windows machines.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING, 28/11/02

The Club intends to conduct a **walk during the Shire Heritage Festival**, probably on the first Saturday in May. The suggested walk is the one conducted last year, taking in Kalimna and the Botanical Gardens.

Also, it was decided to conduct a **walk for the State Festival, at Vaughan Springs and Sailors Gully**, starting at 9 am. Date and details will be released nearer the festival.

A **joint excursion** in the Box-Ironbark forest with **Ballarat FNC** is envisaged for May also.

The colony of **Eltham Copper Butterflies**, which Tony Morton found in Kalimna Park, has been assessed and is considered to be the largest found so far.

There was an excellent turn-up at the last **Roadside Cleanup**. The need for another one in the next couple of months will be assessed after the holidays.

Next year it has been decided to make the **Octopus**, opposite the Castle Motel in Duke Street, the meeting place for excursions, as there is plenty of all day parking, and it is away from the main traffic area.

The **NOMINATION FORM** for officers and committee members is enclosed. Please consider nomination or nominating someone for the committee. Positions of both Secretary and President become vacant in 2003. The form needs to be to the Secretary by Friday Jan. 31 2003.

The Club is holding a **Dawn Breakfast on Sat. Jan 11** at Margaret Badminton's Erin Court property. Meet opposite Tate Carriages on the corner of Midland Highway and Willy Milly Road, near the Bus shelter **at 6am**. BYO everything, but no barbecues, as the bush is too dry. It is hoped that we will be able to walk along the creek on the Golf Course where there is usually excellent birding.

Welcome to new member, Michael Dwyer.

Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the Club.

Reminder - Articles, reports and observations for the CN can be left with Noellene at Tonks Bros., Barker St. if that is more convenient for you.

2002 Committee - E Perkins (President) ph 5472 3124, C Morris (VP and Grievance Officer), G Broadway (Secretary) ph 5472 2513, H van Gemert (Treasurer), R Mills (Newsletter Ed & Public Officer), M Badminton, G Harris, B Maund, M Oliver and R Piesse.

Subscriptions for 2002 - Ordinary membership: Single \$22, Family \$30 Pensioner or student: Single \$19, Family \$24. Supporting \$31.

The subscription includes postage of the *Castlemaine Naturalist*.

*Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, PO Box 324, Castlemaine.
Incorporation #A0003010B*

Castlemaine Naturalist September 2002 Program

General meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January. **Excursions** leave promptly at the times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Also note that outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions.

Business meetings are held at 27 Doveton Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Visitors are welcome at club meetings and excursions.

Tues. Dec. 10. *Bridal Creeper - integrated control techniques.* A seminar by Dr Raelene Kwong, leader Biological Services Team, Keith Turnbull Institute. Presented by the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forest and Mt. Alexander Shire Council. Ray Bradfield Rooms at 7.30 pm.

Thurs. Dec. 12 *2nd Seed Collection Workshop* 9.30 - 3.30. If you would like to attend please contact the Secretary.

Fri. Dec. 13. *Members and Visitors Night.* Members (and visitors) are asked to contribute a small item - a few slides, a short talk, an interesting nature experience etc., etc. Bring a plate of supper. 8pm UCA hall.

Sat Dec. 15. *McKay Reservoir.* This will be the annual breakup picnic tea outing. Meet at Chirp, 13 Mostyn St. at **2.45pm.** or at the McKay Reservoir Gate at 3pm. Leader, H. van Gemert.

Sat. Jan. 11 *Erin Court, Dawn Breakfast.* Details in business meeting report, p7.

Thurs Jan 30 *Business meeting,* 27 Doveton St. **Note,** this is the 5th Thurs.

Mon. Feb. 3 2003. *Historical Society Social Evening.* Members are invited. See p. 7 Nov. CN

Fri. Feb. 14. *Annual Meeting. The New National Parks.* Speaker is Ann Casey, Ranger in Chief, Northern Goldfields area. 8pm UCA hall.

Sat Feb. 15. *Lake Wendouree wetlands,* a look at the birdlife. Take lunch, etc. Leader E. Perkins. Leave **the Octopus**, opposite the Motel in Duke Street, at 10 am sharp.